Jack Anderson

Futile Search For CIA Cash

LINDERMAN'S KEY, Fla. —We came to Linderman's Key—a large clump of palms and mangroves in the shallow, blue-green waters of the Florida keys—in search of treasure.

It was our second attempt to recover a cache of $20 bills that the Central Intelligence Agency had given Cuban exiles to finance their operations against Fidel Castro.

Unhappily, the principles of cost accounting are difficult to apply to undercover missions, and some of the Cubans kept a share of the CIA cash for themselves.

Brad Ayers, an ex-CIA instructor who had trained Cuban commandos on Linderman's Key, had learned from the Cubans where $250,000 had been stashed.

Earlier, he led my associate Les Whitten through mangrove swamps and tangled underbrush to the spot where $50,000 had been buried in a blue suitcase. The ground at the remote hiding spot had been thoroughly shoveled and sifted.

Apparently, someone had reached the site ahead of them and had made off with the loot. But they searched the brush and found six weathered $20 bills that evidently had been dropped.

Ayers didn't accompany us on our second expedition. But he gave us explicit directions where $200,000 was supposed to be hidden in two aluminum rifle containers. One supposedly had been weighted and sunk under six feet of water in an abandoned cistern. The other reportedly had been lashed or bolted to the channel bottom between the pilings of a dock.

WE RECRUITED an experienced crew, headed by Lewis Goodman, a huskily handsome, 47-year-old adventurer who has discovered a sunken Spanish galleon off the coast of Bimini, hacked through the jungles of Guyana in a futile search for diamonds, and panned gold in the Dominican Republic.

We anchored under a savagely hot sun in Broad Creek channel, then headed in a small skiff across a sunken sandflat to Linderman's Key. Ayers had told us how he had trained his Cuban commandos in outdoor survival on the parched island and had led them in rubber boats on covert, amphibious operations to the other sands strung like great stepping stones across water streaked with deep blues and bright greens.

Linderman's Key was deserted when we pulled up to the wooden dock. One canister, stuffed with $100,000 in $20 bills, was reportedly anchored under another dock at the end of the island. But we decided to look for the abandoned cistern first.

It was a hot, still, tropical afternoon. The only sound of life was the buzzing of horseflies. A cormorant, known less formally in these parts as a "water turkey," had been stirred from his afternoon nap by our arrival.

The island was dominated by a shabby white house. Through the windows, we could see bunkbeds. About 70 yards behind the house, near a clump of scrub cactus and a tangle of rotting brush, we found the abandoned cement cistern. It was exactly as Ayers had said it would be.

We scrambled over it and peered through a manhole into its dank depths. It appeared to be empty. Les Whitten leaped inside with the underwater flashlight we had thought would be necessary.

He found only an inch of water on the bottom, some broken tile piping and a fresh hornets' nest. No canister full of cash. If the money had been there, someone had drained the cistern and again had beaten us to it.

DROOPING NOW like the listless palms, we returned to the skiff and put-putted over to the other dock. It had been crushed by storms. Old wooden pilings, some of them anchored in cement bases, poked up above the water.

With snorkel equipment, we searched the bottom. The pilings were encrusted with barnacles, the bottom covered with silt.

I spotted a cable, the sort that might have been used to lash a canister to the bottom. But it turned out to be unattached. Lew Goodman, wearing an eight-pound diving belt and studded gloves, went down to search the silt. He buried his arm in it up to the pit.

With crowbars, we continued to probe the silt. All we came up with were pieces of planking studded with rusty nails. Some of the planking was so rotten it crumbled in our hands. Obviously, it would take dredging equipment to sift the four-foot accumulation of silt.

Regretfully, we abandoned our treasure hunt. We are still convinced, after double-checking Brad Ayers' story carefully, that $250,000 intended to be used against Castro was stashed away instead. But all we can return to the CIA after our two adventures in Florida are six tattered $20 bills.

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